

Ottawa fears suit over native languages

Postmedia News Feb 16, 2012 – 11:35 PM ET | **Last Updated: Feb 17, 2012 4:23 PM ET**

By Randy Boswell

The federal government is braced for a possible lawsuit aimed at forcing it to give “certain aboriginal languages” the same official status as English and French, according to an access-to-information document obtained by Postmedia News.

The July 2010 briefing note to Heritage Minister James Moore, who also oversees the country’s Official Languages Act, indicates that “the Assembly of First Nations is considering taking the government of Canada to court” to enshrine an unspecified number of indigenous languages as “official” in Canadian law.

Related

- [Languages Commissioner Graham Fraser: French and English still matter in Canada](#)
- [Official bilingualism costs \\$2.4B a year: study](#)

The document advises Mr. Moore that if the subject arises, he should emphasize that the government is “committed to supporting the preservation and revitalization of First Nations, Metis and Inuit languages” and is currently “providing \$16-million annually” for that purpose.

Alain Garon, a spokesman for the Ottawa-based Assembly of First Nations, said the organization is “not engaged in any lawsuit on aboriginal languages.” But the briefing note to Mr. Moore — dated July 23, 2010 — appears to have been prompted by an AFN communiqué issued a day earlier from the assembly’s annual meeting in Winnipeg, where First Nations leaders stated that they “affirm the indigenous languages as the first languages of our nations and as official languages of Canada.”

The perilous state of most aboriginal languages in Canada has become a pressing concern in recent years for indigenous communities, government agencies and linguistics experts.

Data gathered from the 2006 census showed that nearly all of the 60-plus aboriginal languages spoken in Canada are endangered, with only Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut — the language spoken by Inuit — proving strong enough to sustain themselves in a country dominated by English or French speakers.

A Statistics Canada report issued in 2008 showed that between 2001 and 2006, the number of people speaking Haida, Tlingit and Malecite dropped by about 30% each.

Background information accompanying the memo to Mr. Moore indicated that “the decline of aboriginal languages can largely be attributed to the long history of the removal of children from aboriginal communities through the Indian residential school system, the migration of aboriginal peoples to urban settings and the impact of mass media.”

Postmedia News